Greenfield, Kilgobbin, near Dublin
Sunday, Oct. 27. 1861

My dear Mr May,

Your last letter - dated Oct. 11 - reached me yesterday and contrary to my usual experience of your letters - it filled me with sadness & depression and I have been longing to take an early opportunity to answer it. You are so reasonable, temperate & highly principled & I have such confidence in you that I place far more value on ~~the~~ your testimony respecting the state of feeling in America ~~a~~ towards England than I would upon that of any other American I know of. I think the bitterness & estrangement of your countrymen wherever England is concerned arises from causes almost inherent in the nature of things, & ~~that~~ which we of this generation on either side of the Atlantic, can hardly comprehend, control, or prevent. I allude to the great American revolution & to the changes brought about by your system of Government, & the facilities which they gave for a vast immigration from other countries. The facts that power is in the hands of the masses, that great material prosperity has been enjoyed, that the people have been continually flattered to the utmost by all who aimed at political position, ~~unceasingly courted~~ together with the avidity with which wealth was pursued & the self reliance which these circumstances induced, have produced an amount of national self esteem which ~~demands~~ insists upon admiration & is not readily submissive to reverses. We in these countries in the near neighbourhood of military nations with greater armies than our own have been compelled to a degree of moderation & caution in our national demeanour which, until now, you have not had any occasion for, for nearly 40 years during which your territory & your population have received enormous additions not always of the most desirable kind. The feeling of national power & greatness commensurate with the extent of your empire has imbued the less educated portion of your people with an amount of boastful self confidence & overweening strength. Under such circumstances the Southern secession, & the breaking up of the Union, & the danger to the national prestige have been felt as a terrible shock & disaster, loudly demanding the active sympathy of a kindred country like England. Yet in England, partly from ignorance, partly from the national indifference toward the internal affairs of other countries, partly from a notion that you ought to be glad to have done with the slave states & slavery, partly from the slowness & unimpulsiveness of the British character the response was weak & feeble compared with the importance of the crisis & the urgency of the call in the eyes of Americans & hence the intensity of the anger & disappointment felt & expressed & still existing on your side of the ocean. This is my theory of the hostile state of the American mind towards us. I don't think it can be explained by any thing we have actually said or done so much as by what we have omitted to say & do. Hence I conclude that an active feeling of anger against us prevails in the States — whilst to the best of my belief no corresponding emotion exist amongst us. In my opinion the prevalent English feeling is in favor of northern success — the reprobation of the utter villainy of the Southern leaders. Nobody I meet can understand why you are angry with us — whilst every American seems to think that you do well to be angry & that our conduct is something ~~at~~ outrageously base, & unaccountable & at variance with all the past opposition of the English people to slavery.

The indifference of your President & Statesmen to the interests of Slavery (whilst no other rights of property are practically regarded) causes great astonishment & mystification & perhaps some contempt. The affair of Bull Run created amazement, not so much that there was a panic — but that it was proclaimed & made the most of in every newspaper, whilst statements not more highly colored in the Times were bitterly resented — we could hardly believe our eyes when we read and that regiments of volunteers marched off the field the very day of the battle because their time of service were up & they would wait no longer and were met with ovations on their return were such a trifling. Comments of all kinds reflecting your officers are made in our papers. In a country where the press is free they cannot be prevented but I cannot see why we should be regarded as enemies on this account. Nothing so bad is said of the North by English writers as is constantly to be found in the [illegible] & slandered from the columns of Northern papers respecting Northern people. In my opinion a very small portion of the plodding people of these islands don't think of the United States from morning till night & are utterly unconscious of the hostile feelings with which they are regarded on account of the outspoken comments of newspaper writers whose bread & butter depends upon the cleverness of their daily articles. I don't in the least ~~bel of in~~ believe that our ministry are unfriendly in their feelings to the free states — or that they would not be heartily glad if the rebellion were put down tomorrow, provided Slavery were abolished along with it. They must know as every body else knows, that so long as Slavery is upheld by the U.S. government ~~the~~ peace can never be secure & unity must always be endangered. It is very [illegible] that the English people dread war as a cause of loss of property & an inflicter of heavy taxation — & that this has forced ~~it~~ upon them their policy of intervention which they have only lately taken up. A contrary course at the time of the French revolution was the cause of a prodigious outlay of blood & treasure. This dread of war with powerful enemies has also induced the rulers of England to submit very unwillingly to a domineering & insulting treatment from your federal governments which the public opinion of these islands stomached very unwillingly although they acquiesced in its prudence. The conviction that this course of the American government was flattering to the self esteem of the American people & their dislike of England has doubtless diminished the regret felt on this side at the unpleasant emergency of the Union — the more especially as, even since the outbreak, a tariff hostile to British trade has been adopted & such men of mark as Seward & Wendell Phillips have talked about possibly annexing Canada [as a compensation for the ~~lo~~ possible loss of the Slave States?] It has been often stated in our organs of public opinion that the maintenance of so vast a union as yours, consisting of such varying interests & antagonistic elements was not only improbable — but that if it did continue at the rate of development of the last 50 years, with the world's past experience of its aggressive & domineering character, it would be dangerous to the peace & liberty of other nations. This may lessen the regret at the probability of a dissolution which would otherwise prevail amongst us. You speak of a ship having reached Savannah from England laden with warlike stores. Very possibly but why blame our government for this unless they have power to prevent it ~~[illegible]~~, which I do not believe. I think that if they favored either side, it would be the Confederates & I feel as sure as I am of my existence that public opinion in England would condemn them if they did. *I am confident* that no ministry could retain power in England which ~~the~~ took ~~such~~ a course so contrary to all the sentiments of the majority of the British people. As a great organ of the English conservative party it is no wonder the *Quarterly* should talk of the failure of a democratic experiment, although in your day it has been marred by the Slaveocracy; men & people really in love with freedom would not have allowed a handful of slaveholders to make such cats paws of them as your democracy has done. It is, I think, a fault to which Democracies are peculiarly liable that they are apt to be led astray by the false representations of designing leaders. How horribly corrupt & unfaithful have the governments of the United States been for the last 30 years at least, having been for a good part of that time ruled by the leaders of the present secession

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Warned by your experience the present disposition of the English people is less disposed for radical changes or for any tendency towards a greater admixture of democracy in the principles of government than I have ever known it to be. This is my own feeling & I am not able to see that real liberty is at all promoted by making a numerical majority, including the poorest, most excitable & most ignorant of the people, the real rulers of a country. If the majority of Irishmen were the rulers of Ireland we would have an ecclesiastical tyranny like that of Rome (along with an Inquisition) very soon in full operation. Celtic Ireland, Catholic Ireland has a very imperfect appreciation of real constitutional freedom, & the patriots they praise & admire are those that would put saddles on our backs & seat priests in the saddles. In my opinion no such hostility, no such bitterness as exist amongst you towards England, exists amongst us towards America, except on such a scale as is not generally appreciable. I doubt not that venal English writers & venal English merchants & manufacturers can be hired for money to embrace the cause of the rebellion — but the same is true in the Northern States, & it proves as little against the one nation as against the other.

Since writing the above I have read part of your letter to a friend of mine, a Dublin merchant of ~~the first~~

of the first rank, who is also as intelligent & clear headed a man as any I know, and of an eminently impartial & judicial turn of mind. He says you are quite mistaken (& I agree with him), in attributing so much influence to the cotton interest in England — that they are far from possessing the overwhelming weight in the control of affairs which ~~as~~ you attribute to them. Although an important class, they are vastly inferior to the landed interest in weight & substance — and ~~these~~ irrespective of their relative power, the fact is that it does not appear they have attempted to use it for the purpose of breaking the blockade — or in any way marring the national policy of non intervention.

He says his conviction is that though such a thing might not be openly proclaimed by any body, there is probably ~~sufficient~~ so much jealousy, or dislike of the manufacturers in the minds of the landholders (including the aristocracy & county gentry) that they would perhaps not be very sorry to see them a little put about by this American difficulty. He says that Americans find it almost impossible to apprehend the extent to which affairs in this country are controlled by the variety of classes & interests which exists amongst us.

With respect to the ships laden with stores ~~that~~ for the Confederates that ran the blockade & escaped into Charleston, he says that they had regular papers for some port not in the United States, and that our government had no power to interfere. My son has just returned from Huddersfield in Yorkshire. The general depression of business is very great there, as well as elsewhere, chiefly owing to your Civil war.

Yet one of the great woollen factories will be kept busy all the winter with an order for 120,000 pairs of blankets supposed to be for the Federal government. Should our government stop the order? In point of fact our rulers are strictly bound by law in all their proceedings – and Lord Palmerston is just as open to an action at law for contravening his legal powers as I am. During the Russian war I believe it is well known that warlike supplies were furnished by the citizens of the United States to the Russians & it is unquestionable that sympathy for the Emperor Nicholas as against England & France was freely expressed. Yet that war succeeded in its object of crippling the Russian power, and putting down the Autocrat's hardly concealed intention to strangle all manifestations of liberty in Europe. If he had lived, Italy, Hungary & Poland would not have had even their present chance. Just as there are traitors in Washington, New York & Boston, who care for nothing but themselves, so there are money getters in England who care for nothing but money – but it would be as fair to include in one condemnation all the people of the Free States as all the people of England on account of the conduct of individuals in these matters.

My friend to whom I have already alluded thinks it likely that any feeling towards you which may exist in England may take the shape of a sense of relief in the chance that the Union may be broken into two not very friendly confederacies — & that our government will thus be relieved from the perpetually recurring threats, insults, & aggressions of a Union of States whose rulers always found it their most popular course to pick quarrels with England & to insult her on all possible occasions. If this feeling exists, I cannot see that it is unnatural or unreasonable or very blameable. My friend agrees with me in thinking you clearly apprehend the extent & value of the anti-slavery feeling of England — that the amount of high principled abolitionism is small, & that the remainder is simply sentimental, traditional & has no deep foundation. In fact, that Englishmen would for the most part act like Americans under similar circumstances — no better — & no worse. Being an Irishman & having lived all my life in Ireland, I have no special admiration for Englishmen individually. Collectively I regard them as having the surest grasp of constitutional liberty & the best appreciation of it of any people in the world. I think the habit of deferring to the Slave power for the sake of its consent to form part of the Union has greatly corrupted the moral sense of the American people & will long impede their true progress as a great & free people. I cant imagine greater folly or wickedness than that which has been ascribed with some appearance of truth to Mr Seward, of a readiness to go to war with England in order to unite your populations in a common object founded upon an infatuated & unreasonable hatred to a kindred & friendly nation — which will only fight you if she must. No war would be more unpopular in England than a war with America — but if John Bull must fight, he will fight beyond a peradventure.

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I am much obliged for the notices of John Brown in the Liberator & Standard, both so complimentary & soothing, to the vanity of a poor author whose book has met with far greater acceptance from the Reviewers than from the public. Two only out of a considerable number of favorable notices in the English papers are from the pens of people who know me. And yet, of an impression of 1000 copies, not more than 500 have been sold. This ~~[illegible]~~ is perhaps partly owing to the adventures of Brown having already occupied the public mind which tires so fast & ever requires new excitement. Partly that the times are very dull, chiefly owing to your troubles & that some degree annoyance is felt with every thing American in consequence. I sent 10 to a Manchester friend who writes me that she has not succeeded in selling 5. Still I think the book has an abiding interest in the remarkable character of its hero & his adherents & I don't quite despair that it will eventually go off. Only that it is little more than 2 months since it was published in London & that the copies to America went in a sailing ship I would be uneasy about their safety. I omitted to send a bill of lading to you but enclosed one to Mrs Chapman who by the way writes me very long letters which I am greatly puzzled to make English of. I had one of 36 pages of note paper from her yesterday. I am quite sure that if you or I exactly understood what she wanted to say (which I do not) we could express it without obscurity or ambiguity in one ninth of the quantity of superficial area. It will be difficult to raise funds for your purposes either in England or Ireland partly from the distress of the times & partly that the ideas of compensation & of the war powers are mixed in your memorial & they are both distasteful to most of the Zealous ones among your friends with whom I am acquainted. I think an express application would have been better made on the ground of the necessity of maintaining the Standard & the other operations of the Society, speaking in general terms, without reference to war power or compensation. I don't believe in compensation. I don't think if the thing comes to a peaceful emancipation the North will be disposed to pay any more than they are now paying in blood & treasure to those who have ~~already~~ cost them so much already.

The general feeling here is that the North is much less able to subdue the South than Great Britain was to subdue the Colonies — that the South is hopelessly estranged & that if you conquer them, a Union is from henceforth impossible on Republican principles — since the conquerors & the conquered cannot act together for mutual benefit

In the Edinburgh Review for October is an article on the Democracy of America which contains a good deal of truth on the relations between Gt Britain & the United States. At the same time I don't at all comprehend the writer's opposition to a proclamation of freedom to the slaves as unconstitutional at a time when the Constitution is openly defied & disowned by the rebels & that the life of the nation is in question. I do think that two confederations instead of the one union would give rise to endless quarrels & complications, besides requiring two armies & all the paraphernalia of two military governments, ~~& [illegible] influences~~ from which you have heretofore been free. The fact that the slaveowners have such power over the nonslaveholders & that they have had such power over the northern democracy, speaks very little for the hopefulness of any government founded on the will of an ignorant, vain, prejudiced, excitable multitude. I hear Archbishop Hughes (true to the instincts of his order) has declared that ~~the~~ a proclamation of liberty to the slaves would lose for us sympathy from the Irish. Just so – he is just the kind of stuff out of which our Irish Catholic repealers & haters of England are made – the bitterest enemies of real liberty of thought or action the wide world over – the men that curse Cavour & curse Garibaldi & worship the Austrians & the Pope

I have looked for the article from the Star that you refer me to in the Liberator, & have not found it. The Star is the organ of the Manchester School (of Peace, retrenchment & reform, of a more extended suffrage, & of Cobden & Bright) in London. It is a respectable paper & is exactly opposed to the stand still, conservative doctrines now most in favour, thanks to the evil savour of American democracy as the most favourable to real constitutional liberty.

I don't think I could give you my own views of things more clearly in writing than I have done. You may read them to whoever you please, making the needful omissions. As to Wendell Phillips all that Aaron Powell says in praise of him I echo with all my heart. But we abolitionists are bound to worship nobody, nor take them as our masters if they err. I am sure that Wendell Phillips is in error about England & that in talking as he did about Canada he was more than in error. But he is too intensely American to be impartial in his judgments of any ~~thing~~ other nation so regarded as alien as ~~to~~ is Great Britain by most of his countrymen.

Yours ever affectionately

Richd D Webb

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